

# **VA Sets Goal: Eliminate Homelessness in Five Years**

By: Rachel Walters, MVAHCS Administrative Fellow

8/19/2010 - MINNEAPOLIS -- On any given night, approximately 700 Veterans in Minnesota find themselves without permanent housing. Lacking the luxury of an established residence, they seek shelter in a variety of places — community safe havens, the homes of loved ones or even outdoors.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki has launched a plan to address this problem affecting Veterans nationwide. With the help of VA staff, he plans to eliminate homelessness among Veterans in the next five years by relying on the four pillars of Prevention, Crisis Intervention, Treatment and Housing.

Homelessness is defined as lacking a regular nighttime residence, residing in a shelter or institution, or residing in a structure that's not designed for sleeping. The factors that contribute to homelessness are numerous, ranging from job loss to substance abuse and mental health concerns.

The Minneapolis VA Health Care System (MVAHCS) has embraced the chance to increase homeless outreach efforts. The medical center's Homeless Program is currently 16 employees strong, and the scope of services is continuously increasing. "This expansion is exciting and will allow us to continue to meet Veterans' needs," says Program Director, Jonelle Draughn

Homeless Program staff performs a vast array of functions. They regularly conduct outreach and education initiatives to help prevent Veterans from becoming homeless. They also work with community partners to promote benefits, housing and treatment options available through the VA. This partnership is playing a huge role in the success of MVAHCS's Homeless Program.

Through community partnerships, MVAHCS is able to provide more flexible and accessible care to Veterans. For example, each week, Homeless Program staff members are present in at least 8 community shelters to represent the medical center and provide information to Veterans.

About the partnership, Draughn states, "We are striving to be more present [in the community] than ever before. We want to meet clients where they're at." This fresh approach to reaching homeless Veterans is proving to be very effective. In Fiscal Year 2009, the homeless program saw 565 clients – a number that is expected to grow in coming years.

Community organizations seem to be benefiting from the partnership as well. According to Draughn, the smooth partnerships result from the shared goal of providing high quality care and services to Veterans in need.

A number of new initiatives are in the works that support Shinseki's goal of eliminating homelessness. Nationally, VA has developed both a Call Center for homeless Veterans seeking immediate assistance and a plan to aid homeless Veterans with child support issues. Locally, MVAHCS staffers are developing a mobile team to travel to different geographic areas of Minnesota. Staff also plan to work with mobile Vet centers to provide homeless services in MVAHCS Community-Based Outpatient Clinics.

On Aug. 11, about 50 people from governmental agencies and local non-profit groups held a forum at MVAHCS to discuss outreach efforts and to identify barriers to success.

It was the consensus of the meeting that the VA has set a "lofty goal" but one that deserved pursuing.

### **What can you do to help?**

- Refer homeless Veterans to weekly Front Porch meetings
  - Thursdays, 8 – 9:30 a.m., 1J-124 (check-in between 7:30 – 8)
- Promote hotline to homeless Veterans seeking immediate assistance
  - 1-877-4AID-VET